English and Information Technology:
Reading Literature for Comprehension and Communication

Rajeshwar Mittapalli
Professor of English, Kakatiya University, Warangal 506009 Telangana, India

English literature and technology have been often viewed as strange bedfellows. The possibility of using modern technology in the field of literary studies has been rarely visualized. But these are modern times and everything is related. If scientific and technological advances are exploited by the science fiction writers such as H.G. Wells, Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia E. Butler to create masterpieces of literature, why not use the same knowledge to read and understand literary works more efficiently? Let us seek an answer to this question. But first a short theoretical consideration of the related concepts.

The term 'comprehension' in the title of this essay refers to the benefits accruing from reading literature, especially English literature, and these benefits include expanding the reader's mental horizons, enriching his cultural and social experience, sensitizing him to the problems of the world and generally making a better human being of him. The term 'communication' on the other hand refers to the acquisition and honing of language skills such as vocabulary expansion, spontaneous absorption of grammatical structures, enhancement of the power of expression and general felicity with the English language.

In the context of literary studies these two terms -- comprehension and communication -- invariably suggest the emphasis accorded to the reading of numerous literary works in university departments of English. But here, a pertinent question almost automatically springs to our mind: Are our students reading books and other printed materials at all? The answer is unfortunately a definite 'no.' Reading had gone the way of the dinosaurs a long time ago, that is, it has become more or less an extinct habit. Our students no longer read voluminous literary classics, as a rule, in their courses. For teachers of English literature this is a painful situation. They readily blame it on modern distractions such as satellite TV, cellphones and computers connected to the internet. All these three devices have an addictive quality about them. Once a student is hooked on to one or more of them it is difficult to wean him away. The teacher certainly has the option to pull up the student and reprimand him for not doing the mandatory reading in a literature class. But it will be of little or no avail. Blaming the students will be like the proverbial workman blaming his tools and we know it very well that only a bad workman blames his tools. If it happens to be a good teacher he would look for ways and means of getting the students to read books one way or the other. To be able to get the students interested in reading again the teacher needs to be innovative, imaginative and resourceful and be ready to adopt a whole new approach to the issue. If the students are not enthusiastic about reading printed materials it is time he considered other possibilities.

We no longer do many things the way we used to do them just a couple of decades ago. For instance, we no longer go to see films in a regular cinema house, at least not as frequently as in the past; instead, we see films in our home theatres. We no longer wait for the radio to play music at a scheduled time; instead, we play music of our choice on our iPods and MP3

players. We no longer write letters to communicate with others; instead, we speak to people on the cellphone or at the most write e-mail messages. So the BIG question is: Why should our students read printed materials the old fashioned way when they do not find it interesting? Isn't there a way out? There surely is one. What is being suggested here is that the very distractions mentioned earlier -- TV, cellphones and computers -- can be used as learning devices so that they are, this time round, encouraging the students to read books rather than distract them.

The modern man's imagination is dominated by visual culture. In the recent decades there has been an irrevocable transition from the print culture to visual culture because of the immense popularity gained by the films, TV, cellphones and the internet. The films, TV and the internet have also proved to be the best means of communicating the life and culture contained in the literary works to audiences across the globe. Given this scenario it is imperative to explore their potential applications in the context of literary studies.

TV, cellphones and computers come handy in reading English literature even if they are of not much use when it comes to reading stray printed material. Almost all the English literary classics are now available in audio book form, video book form and in film/TV serial versions often with the text appearing on the screen as subtitles. The cellphone, for example, can be used as a playback device of all these forms of books, but especially audio books. If it is a cellphone with advanced features, a number of audio books can be copied on to its memory card and played back at the convenience of the student and with the added advantage of pausing, pondering and proceeding and multitasking while listening. A moderately sized novel such as Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* can be heard on the cellphone in about five hours at a stretch or in installments, while reading the printed book might take, at our students' pace, anything up to a week! This way the books prescribed as part of a whole literature course can be completed in just a couple of days -- and this is not an overstatement at all. Listening to an audio book has other advantages too. The intonation of the reader (who is almost always a native speaker of English) draws attention to the subtle nuances and intricate shades of meaning of words and sentences that would otherwise be unrecognizable for the Indian reader. In case of poetical works the music and rhythm that the audio book reader usually maintains would be a bonus. This makes the audio book experience richer and more rewarding than regular reading. Visually challenged students can take advantage of audio books and have the same experience as reading books the usual way.

Similarly the TV, in combination with a DVD player or pen-drive, can be used as a device for playing primarily video books and films. The advantage of a video book is that it has user friendly features such as text synchronized with audio and interactive transcript appearing on the screen. All that a student has to do is to sit back and look at the screen. He can see the text on the screen in large font and hear while it is read by a native speaker. It is a whole new way of reading a book! The important senses – sight and hearing -- will be 'assailed' by the visuals and voice and there will be no choice for the student other than paying attention to what he sees and hears. Senses are by definition outward bound. They understand only what happens outside the body. The idea here is to engage as many senses as possible in the act of reading and not just one -- sight -- for better comprehension. Multitasking is not possible in this mode of reading but the time required is more or less the same as an audio book. One can

always choose to have the book read at a slower pace but it still remains a fact that in just about the time required to watch an Indian film on the TV, together with the advertisements, an entire book can be comfortably read.

The multi-media computer can be put to a wide variety of uses including as an audio/video playback device. As a playback device it is highly interactive and easy to navigate. Its storage and retrieval capabilities make it even more appealing.

All these three modes -- or at least any two of them -- would kind of lend depth and meaning to reading literature. Listening to the book, watching the text appear on the TV screen or the computer monitor and watching the film version of the book would be a wholesome experience. The feature films, and sometimes even TV serials,[1] would greatly supplement the reading part since they concretize in the minds of the students the physical appearance of the characters, their social and cultural milieu and the scenes, sights and images which they can otherwise only vaguely imagine and insufficiently comprehend. And we know that visual memory lasts longer than auditory and other kinds of memory. Also, visual object perception and long-term memory go together, as Palmeri and Tarr put it in the book *Visual Memory*.[2] After watching the film the student can, with the minimum effort, recall the entire book from his memory at will, and with a remarkable degree of accuracy. And if the films contain the text of the book as subtitles, as it does in the films of the BBC TV's Shakespeare Project 1978-85, the films will combine in themselves all the three great features -- audio, video and text.

Having experienced these modes of reading, the student cannot possibly complain of boredom and fatigue which are supposedly characteristic of the old fashioned way of reading printed books. Reading now 'happens' naturally and no strain or pain is associated with it.

What's more, while listening to the text, which is most often read by a native speaker of English, the student will have sustained exposure to native English pronunciation and it will almost involuntarily train his ears and attune his mind to the phonetic subtleties of the English language. If he is receptive and diligent enough he can greatly profit from this experience and improve his English pronunciation and accent. As children we have all learnt our mother tongue primarily from listening to the adults around us. There is no reason why the same principle should not apply now, even if somewhat late in the day. In other words, constant exposure to the spoken and visual word configuration contributes to the spontaneous improvement of the student's communication skills and that brings us to the 'communication' part of this essay.

Communication in English constitutes a separate science in itself and there are several theories governing it.[3] But they are all agreed on the point that communication skills are best learnt the natural way, in an everyday context, and by making a functional use of language. This is exactly what happens in the literary texts one reads and hears. From the conversation of the characters in various contexts and from the description of different scenes, sights and mental states the student will not only pick up contextual vocabulary but also learn how the words, phrases and even whole sentences are pronounced with the correct stress and

intonation. This is a surefire way of improving one's familiarity and felicity with the English language and eventually build excellent communicative capability.

Let's now consider the important question of where to find these materials -- the audio records, the videos and the films. Ideally they should be bought on the open market, but when that is not possible they can be downloaded from various public domain websites. In the latter case the English teacher needs to be techno-savvy and willing to spare his time and energy and his institution should be ready to provide the necessary resources. Materials downloaded from the public domain websites are free from copyright restrictions and do not invite problems.

Audio Books: The best website which provides more than 50,000 free audio books, including many literary classics, is LibriVox.[4] Literary works -- fiction, poetry, dramatic works and non-fiction -- ranging from *Aesop's Fables* to James Joyce's *Ulysses* are available on this site for free download and in different formats -- MP3, M4b and RSS feed. Another website containing a rich collection of audio books (and e-books) is Loyal Books.[5]

Video Books: Video books are a recent phenomenon. YouTube features a number of video books. Mention may be made here of the following: Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion*, *Emma*, *Persuasion* R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.

Films: Public Domain Torrents,[6] for example, has on its offer list about 1000 full-length films that are free and legal to download. Wikipedia lists[7] more than 270 films that are in the public domain. A significant number of these films are based on literary classics. If resources are available, subscription services such as Netflix can also be considered in this context.

Having acquired the audio and video materials, with or without institutional support, the teacher can experiment with them. He will soon realize that they have a salutary effect on the students, i.e. the quality of their reading, their comprehension of literature and their comfort levels with the English language shall have greatly improved.

Finally, the whole exercise should be seen as a part of the process of modernization of the teaching of English literature and bringing it in line with the technology enhanced social environment that obtains around us. If the traditional mode of reading is no longer favoured by the students for whatever reason, there is no point in faulting, blaming and shaming them. It is just that they find this mode of reading out of sync with modern lifestyle which is dominated by cutting edge technology. Technology has greatly contributed to the improvement of the quality of our life. It has radically altered the way we do many things. Our concept of communication and entertainment, as stated earlier on, is no longer what it was just a couple of decades ago. There is thus no reason why the concept of reading English literature too should not change. And as it should be amply clear by now, the constant

endeavour during the course of this essay has been to drive home this same point. It started off by identifying the declining reading habit among our students as the problem and it has held the visual media partially responsible for it. It draws to a close by stating that the mediation of technology, in other words the purposeful employment of the same media, can potentially popularize reading once again and make it a rewarding experience at that.

Notes and References

1. The TV serials on literary classics are an interesting sub-genre of the films. These TV serials, by virtue of being far longer than feature films, usually depict literary works in their entirety, scene by scene, and they often even incorporate the dialogues exactly as they appear in the text version. That way, from the point of view of the students, the experience of watching TV serials is even better than seeing films. Any number of these TV serials are now available on DVDs. Here are a few of them: Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1978 BBC serial, 6+ hrs), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1995 BBC serial, 5.5 hrs), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1994 BBC serial, 6.25 hrs), and Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1965 BBC serial, 6.5 hrs).
2. Thomas J. Palmeri and Michael J. Tarr, "Visual Object Perception and Long-term Memory," *Visual Memory*, ed. Steven J. Luck and Andrew Hollingworth (New York: Oxford UP, 2008) 163-208.
3. For a detailed account of the theories governing communication see *The Communication Theory Reader*, ed. Paul Cobley (London: Routledge, 1996), and for a discussion of communication skills see Owen Hargie, "Skill in Theory: Communication as Skilled Performance," *The Handbook of Communication Skills*, ed. Owen Hargie (New York: Routledge, 2006) 7-36.
4. LibriVox <http://librivox.org/>.
5. Loyal Books <http://www.loyalbooks.com/>.
6. Public Domain Torrents <http://www.publicdomaintorrents.net/nshowcat.html?category=ALL>. This site has on its offer list, among others, the following films: *A Farewell to Arms* (Ernest Hemingway), *Gulliver's Travels* (Jonathan Swift), *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë), *The Scarlet Letter* (Nathaniel Hawthorne), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Victor Hugo), *The Moonstone* (Wilkie Collins) and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (Ernest Hemingway).
7. Wikipedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_films_in_the_public_domain_in_the_United_States>